

Appleby Archaeology Group October Meeting

Members of Appleby Archaeology Group and a number of visitors enjoyed a fascinating talk on the evidence for Viking Settlements in the Lake District. Steve Dickinson, an archaeologist who has worked in Cumbria for over 20 years, talked of his work in the Kentmere Valley in the 1980s and a proposed project at Urswick.

In introduction he spoke of the evidence of Viking incursions into the Lake District including signs of military activity citing, as examples, spearheads found at Kentmere and a grave at Hesket in the Forest where a broken sword was found. Other evidence is found in the Scandinavian sculpture seen on many crosses in the county, an exceptional one being the Gosforth Cross and on hogback tombstones, examples of which can be seen at Penrith and Appleby. The prevalence of place names, particularly in the central lakes and suggestions of looting, such as the Ormside bowl found in a Viking tomb, are further evidence of a Viking presence.

Steve then explained that there was little to indicate where the Vikings had settled in Lakeland and that clues to help identify settlements could be found by studying the Viking villages at the Brough of Birsay on Orkney and at Jarshof on Shetland. It is difficult to find evidence linking particular sites to the Vikings and one of the reasons, he suggested, is that the same sites have been used by others both before and after the times they were likely to have been occupied by the Vikings.

He then described Cumbria after the Romans left, in the early historical period often spoken of as the dark ages, and emphasised the continuity, reuse and development of sites. Small but significant fortlets, often on rocky outcrops or tors, such as one that overlooks Mardale, are found. Those who built them may have drawn inspiration from Roman sites. In the hills the remains of stone huts or shielings have been found and the footings of some found in Ennerdale suggest a Scandinavian influence. The shielings do not appear to have associated contemporary field systems and some seem to have continued in use to Medieval times. The early Christian church had a significant presence in Cumbria at the time and monastic sites were vulnerable to attack from the Vikings and where these sites are known archaeologists may, in time, find physical evidence of such attacks.

He then discussed some of the findings from an excavation at Bryant's Gill in the Kentmere Valley, an area rich in names of Scandinavian origin such as "scales", an upland hut, "gill" and "beck". The Gill is an upland site, set in the middle of a prehistoric landscape where a number of flint artefacts have been found. The site been intensively analysed and its appearance is similar to upland sites of the same era found in Norway. 500 square meters of turf were removed to expose wall footings, a building 10 metres by 5 was identified with entrances at either end, and post holes and internal paving were evident. Charcoal and burnt stone were found and carbon dating provided two dates, 760-800AD and 800-975AD. It is likely that it was first a platform site with a timber hut which was later dismantled and rebuilt in stone. Artefacts found included a cornelian gem stone, iron slag from metal work, honestones and spindlewhorls which had been lathe turned and were made from shale. The Kentmere Valley appears to have all that Scandinavian settlers would have wanted and although there is no hard and fast evidence it may be that the sites of medieval farms indicate the location of the larger Viking farms.

In conclusion Steve spoke of the reasons for a proposed project at Urswick on the Furness peninsula. The Furness area was rich in iron and as there are Scandinavian bloomery sites in the vicinity we know the Vikings were interested in the iron and it may be that settlement sites will be found in the area. In 1907 an Anglo Scandinavian cross fragment of the 9th-10th century was found in the medieval church of St Mary and St Michael at Little Urswick and in 1911 a stone was discovered with a runic inscription which links the site to St Columba. Nearby there is a Roman military site and in the vicinity of the church there are the remains of inner and outer boundaries. It is hoped, funding permitting, to do a geophysical study around the church to try and find more of the site's links with the Romans, the early Christian church and the possible sacking of it by the Vikings.

The talk left the group intrigued and keen to be kept informed of further finds and Steve Dickinson agreed to come back to talk to us next year.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday November 11th, in the Supper Room, Market Hall, Appleby at 7.30pm when Jamie Lund will present his Historic Landscape Survey of Hartsop.